

State of the County Address
Chairman Gerald E. Connolly, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
March, 15, 2007

Hello, I'm Gerry Connolly, Chairman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, and I am pleased to be with you to present this annual report on the State of the County. This is a difficult time for our nation. There is deep anxiety about the war, the national economy, global warming, the threat of terrorism and many other issues. As in communities across America, we in Fairfax County have sons and daughters in harm's way overseas. Having to lower the flags over the Government Center each time a hometown soldier is lost is the most heartbreaking of duties and one that we pray, each time, will be the last.

In the face of all this, we in Fairfax County can be thankful. We enjoy unprecedented prosperity and a continuing high quality of life. Prudent planning, forward thinking policies and a robust, pro-active partnership among government and business, civic, human service and faith organizations have put Fairfax County an enviable position. We enjoy a vibrant economy with low unemployment and low office vacancy rates, a school system that is the envy of the nation and one of the lowest crime rates of comparable jurisdictions anywhere.

So much of the credit for the work that shapes and carries out those policies goes to the hundreds of local volunteers who serve on advisory boards, testify at public hearings, work to promote affordable housing or take time to lobby legislators in Richmond for desperately needed transportation funding. We are truly a model of volunteerism that is unsurpassed anywhere. More and more, municipalities from across the country, as well as emerging democracies across the world, are coming here to study Fairfax's success in fostering citizen-involved government.

The Labor Department recently released a report that cited Fairfax County as "the hub which is driving the Washington area...Fairfax is a magnet – nationwide and worldwide. This is the top rung." Fairfax County added 18,000 jobs this past year to the regional economy.

Fairfax County is the economic engine of the Commonwealth and the Labor Department study has now confirmed that we are also the economic engine of the national capital area, a region that produces professional jobs at nearly twice the rate of the rest of the country. To explain this news, which the authors termed "staggering", they point to a "unique mix" of factors in Fairfax: Low tax rates, a positive attitude toward economic development, top quality public schools and our ability to leverage and respond to the federal government's growing homeland security and intelligence industry.

I was gratified to see that the report also pointed to the need for transit-oriented, mixed-use development, the centerpiece of the Board of Supervisors' cutting-edge land use policies. The change to this more forward thinking planning model can be counter-intuitive for some, who may wonder how building more housing, even if it is within

walking distance of mass transit and employment centers, results in less traffic congestion.

But consider this: Only 17,000 of us now live within the 1,700 square acres of Tysons Corner, our County's urban center, while some 150,000 of us commute to work there every day. That means every morning thousands of us get on the roads bringing us into Tysons, and then every evening we get back on those roads to battle our way out. Imagine a situation where you leave your job, walk out onto a carefully designed pedestrian network, stroll next-door to one of the many restaurants in a mixed-use development adjacent your office, meet your spouse for dinner, or walk a few more steps into the mall for a movie. Afterward you can hop on the train to head home. What would life be like without rush hour? What would our air-quality be like? Studies show that for every 100 cars we take off the roads, we remove more than 525 pounds of nitrogen oxide (NO_x) and more than 650,000 pounds of carbon dioxide (CO₂) from the air. That is the promise of careful, transit-oriented development. And it is a promise that this Board of Supervisors will continue to pursue.

Change is difficult and it will be critical to do it right, to provide clear guidance in the Comprehensive Plan, our citizen-written planning document, that protects adjacent neighborhoods and incentivises the highest possible transit use. There is a need for open dialogue and continuing public participation – something, fortunately, that Fairfax County knows how to do and is widely recognized for pioneering. It was in that spirit that our Transit Oriented Development or TOD Task Force put together language, with the full participation of residents, to define TOD clearly in the County's central planning document and lay out how we will use this tool to mitigate impacts and protect stable neighborhoods.

Further, we created the Land Use Accessibility Task Force on my motion and identified a series of steps that we will take to make the development process even more transparent and accessible to the average citizen.

A key component of relieving our transportation challenge not just in Tysons Corner but across the region is Rail to Dulles.

The one aspect of this project that has drawn most of the public's attention has been the debate over whether to construct a tunnel for the portion through Tysons. Tunneling was evaluated and ruled out as too expensive earlier in the project, but it recently became a viable possibility due to improved technology used overseas and, as soon as this was brought to the attention of the Board last April, we unanimously endorsed this concept and asked Governor Kaine to convene an independent panel to study it. The Governor responded immediately. That study confirmed the Board's position that the tunnel was the preferable alternative. Unfortunately, communication from the Federal Transit Administration and our Congressional delegation indicated that changing the plan this late in the process could jeopardize federal funding and they told the Governor as much. Not wanting to put such a critical project at risk, Governor Kaine acted to protect the project and proceed with the original plan. I still support the tunnel alternative. The Board's

vision of Tysons as a walkable urban environment would be more easily achieved with the tunnel. We all understand the primary mission -- getting rail through Tysons and into the Dulles corridor -- is essential, but until there is a definitive disposition of this issue I will continue to be an enthusiastic advocate for the tunnel. As John Adams, who wrote about the outcome of the struggle for our democracy's birth, once said: "We can't guarantee success, but we can deserve it."

When this board was sworn in three years ago, I laid out an aggressive six point agenda because I believe in setting goals, in giving the people who are dedicated to these goals something to reach for and a way to measure our progress. Mission. Passion. Metrics.

I am very proud that all six priorities were unanimously adopted by the Board. They are:

- stemming the threat of gang violence on our community;
- lessening the reliance on property taxes to reduce the tax burden on homeowners;
- providing multimodal transportation choices that will relieve gridlock for commuters;
- preserving and creating a stock of affordable housing to allow those who serve our community to live here;
- preserving and enhancing our world-class education system;
- And taking measures to address threats to our environment and add to our stock of open spaces.

In three short years, we have made considerable progress on each of these priority areas and you can learn more about them on our Web site at www.fairfaxcounty.gov.

Let me begin by updating you on some of the exciting advances we're making in preserving and enhancing the ENVIRONMENT. Our Board is the first in the County's history to adopt a comprehensive, 20-year environmental plan. This year we received a national award recognizing that accomplishment. Fairfax County has long been proactive in its environmental actions and we have made significant efforts in recent years to reduce carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, but we need a systematic national approach to address the growing concern of global climate change. That is why I am announcing tonight that Fairfax is partnering with the Sierra Club and a select group of other local governments across the United States to unveil a "Cool Counties" initiative. This national effort is designed to reduce greenhouse gases and marshal all 3,000 counties of the United States to this cause. This initiative will be interwoven at all levels of government planning and decision making yet be flexible enough to allow different levels of commitment based on each county's situation to ensure long-lasting, measurable changes.

We are proposing a "cool credit" system of points, providing local governments with a list of actions, programs, initiatives and policies to obtain cool credits. The greater the CO₂ reduction, the greater the number of credits. Local governments that obtain a specified minimum number of credits will be certified as "Cool" Counties. Higher designations will be reserved for those obtaining something beyond the minimum. And the "Coolest" County designation will be given to those that demonstrate exceptional

commitment to this new Cool Counties initiative. Fairfax County has already taken a number of these actions, such as purchasing hybrid vehicles, promoting Green buildings, purchasing wind power and teleworking to name just a few. Fairfax now has 90 hybrids in its vehicle fleet. In 2005 the fuel savings with hybrids amounted to 12, 939 gallons of unleaded gas which equates to a savings of 252,000 pounds of CO2 emissions.

In addition, Fairfax is purchasing 5.8 million kilowatt hours of wind energy, which leads to a reduction of 6.2 million pounds of CO2 during the two-year contract. The County is currently purchasing 5 percent of our electricity through wind energy in 2007. We will expand to 10 percent by 2009.

Telework is another effective tool for reducing our CO2 emissions by taking cars off our roadways and commuters out of already-crowded trains and buses. Removing just 5 percent of cars from the road reduces traffic congestion by up to 20 percent. In 2000, as Chairman of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, I set the goal of having at least 20 percent of all eligible workers in our region telecommuting one day a week by 2005. All 17 jurisdictions in the region endorsed that goal, and Fairfax County was the first to achieve it.

Remember, the idea here is that we want every local jurisdiction to realize that they can become a “Cool County”; while at the same time rewarding those local governments that demonstrate a higher level of commitment. We will present a detailed template of this Cool Counties initiative at the National Association of Counties (NACo) conference in Richmond this July.

I am also very proud that on our watch the County has added 8,000 acres to our park system, increasing its land holdings by 30 percent. I set an ambitious goal that 10 percent of all the land in the County be parkland. We are already at 9.4 percent. The goal is for one in 10 acres to be preserved as county park land, which does not include regional, state or federal parks also located in the county. I don't know of another urban jurisdiction in the country that can say that.

As part of our environmental initiative, the Board took the unprecedented step of setting aside the value of one penny on the tax rate to address the long neglected problem of stormwater management. Quite frankly, the County allowed some practices in decades past that left the runoff from development unmitigated, damaging stream banks, degrading our watersheds and ultimately polluting the Chesapeake Bay. This Board was determined to begin the process of remedying that. The penny provided us \$21.9 million last year. In addition we are conducting comprehensive studies for all 30 of the County's watersheds to restore the water quality for future generations while also restoring eroded stream banks. And cadres of volunteers are being enlisted to partner with us in that project.

The environmental challenges we face are considerable, as we learned this past year. Last June Cameron Run in southern Fairfax flooded, inundating dozens of houses in the Huntington community, where many homeowners did not have flood insurance. The

Board has worked with the Army Corps of Engineers to identify the causes of the flood, which include sedimentation and construction within the floodplain. We are addressing the problem with an expedited investigation to identify the most effective solutions and by offering interim flood insurance assistance. With the state and the Army Corps of Engineers, this Board will work toward a long-term solution for the Huntington community.

Another issue fresh in the minds of most people is our effort to REDUCE THE TAX BURDEN on homeowners. As we've discussed many times, 60 percent of our budget revenue is derived from real estate. That's too high. Last year housing values were up 21.9 percent. This year, those values are down one-third of one percent, meaning the average taxpayer will pay less in real estate taxes this year than he or she did last year. Despite this significant drop in revenue, WE WILL NOT RAISE TAXES THIS YEAR. Fortunately, we have been prudent over the years since this Board came to office, giving back to taxpayers, as we pledged, all the revenue we gained from the tax diversification granted by the legislature, including additional cigarette, recordation and hotel taxes. During the last four years, we have reduced the real estate tax rate from \$1.23 to 89 cents per \$100 of assessed value, eliminated the auto decal and its associated fee and added senior tax relief – all of which saves the average homeowner \$3,525 in taxes they otherwise would have paid.

Even though the housing market has slowed, the need within our community for AFFORDABLE HOUSING is as great as ever. The ironic and vexing part of living in a community where the economy is thriving is that as housing values rise, the working men and women who serve our community cannot afford to live where they work. Firefighters, police, teachers, nurses, store clerks and service people of all kinds must move farther and farther away, putting a strain on their lives and stressing our transportation system. Only 22 percent of Fairfax County's firefighters and 20 percent of our police officers, for example, live in the County they serve. To address this need, the Board unanimously adopted our housing preservation plan that included the historic step of dedicating the value of one penny on the real estate tax rate. We also set a goal for ourselves – to preserve 1,000 units in four years. I'm proud to report that we are well ahead of schedule and have already saved more than 1,300 units that would have otherwise been lost to redevelopment. We are now actively addressing other aspects of our housing needs, including the development workforce housing and the implementation of a 10-year plan to completely eliminate – not just continue to manage -- homelessness in our County.

Fairfax's success is ultimately tied to maintaining and enhancing an EDUCATION system, which is the envy of the country. Our schools are the number one reason businesses compete to locate here. They are the reason that our home values are high and secure. Our early childhood learning initiative is our response to new strides in science that tell us that the earlier a child is exposed to learning the greater his or her chance for success will be. For every dollar we invest in early childhood learning, we experience a \$7 rate of return. Fairfax County is the only large jurisdiction that can boast that all of our high schools made Newsweek's best-in-the-country list. Of the 50 largest jurisdictions in

the United States, Fairfax now has the highest graduation rate with 94 percent of our graduates going on to higher education compared to 66 percent nationwide. And last year our SAT scores were the highest in our County's history. We keep getting better because we invest in our schools. Education will remain our number one priority.

SAFETY in our schools and on our neighborhood streets is of paramount concern to us all. You and I have talked many times about what a safe community we live in, but the statistics bear repeating because they are truly astonishing: Of the 50 largest jurisdictions in the nation, Fairfax County has the lowest crime rate, and last year we hit a 32-year low. Our violent crime rate is half that of our neighboring jurisdictions.

We continue to be recognized nationally for our leadership in Emergency Preparedness. Most recently Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff honored the Emergency Preparedness Regional Taskforce, which I chair, as a model program for interjurisdictional and interdepartmental communications, one of the key stumbling blocks in the past for public safety personnel trying to respond to national disasters. Our region's strategic plan has been singled out for praise by the United States Senate and the Government Accounting Office. Fairfax County is the leader in all these efforts and our public safety personnel on the front lines are known, respected and looked to for leadership the world over.

Tonight it is especially fitting that we pause to give thanks for the dedicated law enforcement personnel who are responsible for the level of safety at which we and our families go about our lives. We can never take for granted the outstanding work of our men and women in blue who put themselves in harm's way every day. Last year we had a painful reminder of the risk they face when, on the afternoon of May 8, a deranged gunman drove to the Sully Police Station armed with an array of assault weapons and opened fire, killing Detective Vicki Armel and Master Police Officer Michael Garbarino. The community outpouring during this ordeal was something our police officers will never forget.

When this Board was sworn in, the one dark cloud that we saw looming over our otherwise safe community was the threat that GANGS might begin to take hold among our young people. There are two fronts from which a community can fight gangs: law enforcement, and prevention and intervention. On law enforcement, Fairfax County was getting high marks. The effectiveness of our gang unit is known throughout the country; our rates of apprehension and prosecution are admirably high.

But the area of prevention – and intervention – needed work. We know that every dollar we put into preventing a young person from joining a gang will save costs on the public safety side later. After endorsing the gang prevention initiative that I brought to the Board three years ago, we held a summit, again attended by hundreds of residents from youth organizations, law enforcement, the business community and faith groups; and we developed a plan. We've moved aggressively. When we began this effort, only three of our middle schools, which have the most gang vulnerable age group, offered constructive after-school programs that would keep them off the streets in the critical hours at the end

of the school day. As of last September, we expanded these programs from three to all 26 County middle schools. We also welcomed many new partners in our efforts. Cox Communications donated \$3 million to create three new Boys and Girls Clubs. We also are soliciting scholarships for at-risk kids to participate in park summer camps.

Another way in which we are moving to provide opportunities for young people is with the construction of synthetic turf fields. Sports promote not just health and fun; they also offer a critical component in deterring gang involvement, providing youngsters with constructive activity and positive role models in the hundreds of volunteer coaches who give so much time to our youth. The synthetic turf initiative will provide 12 major sports venues with low-maintenance turf surfaces that will mean adding four or five times the existing field capacity for our young people.

All of these efforts are paying off. Our most recent youth at risk survey documented a 50 percent decline in the number of teenagers involved in gang activity. That is an accomplishment in which we can all take pride. And while we're on the subject of our young people, let me take just a moment to update you on the progress our teen driving initiative. As you may recall, Fairfax has seen too many teen fatalities on our roadways in recent years. The Board of Supervisors hosted an all-day summit on this topic, and one of the major action items agreed to was the proposal to ask the General Assembly to make it illegal for teens to talk or text on their cell phones while driving. We failed by one vote last year, but our perseverance paid off with the passage of that bill by the General Assembly this year.

The last item, but in many ways the most pressing, on the Board of Supervisor's priority agenda is TRANSPORTATION. This Board enthusiastically adopted the 4-year transportation plan I proposed. None of us expects to eliminate rush hour congestion in an urbanizing region like ours. Every place on earth with populations and thriving economies like ours experiences commuter congestion. But those urban regions have something we have been lacking: choices. When Fairfax began growing we were a bedroom community for federal and other employees who worked in Washington. We saw no need for sidewalk connections and mass transit to take us across the County to places like Tysons Corner, Reston or Fort Belvoir. We were auto dependent and our primary commuting destination was Washington. All our long range planning was designed to keep us that way.

But the Board's four-year plan signaled a new way of thinking about how – and to what destinations -- we move around our County. Our plan focused on the need for a menu of choices that is already making a difference. We have expanded transit by 40 percent in the Richmond Highway corridor, for example. Last May, we opened the first span of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge. The Springfield "mixing bowl" project will be completed later this year. Commuters are experiencing some of those benefits. And we are looking at High Occupancy Toll or HOT lanes on the Beltway and other corridors, offering another choice for drivers, especially at times of peak commuting.

A key component on our menu of transportation solutions is Rail to Dulles. This corridor is the largest employment center in the County, and when Rail to Dulles is complete it will accommodate 91,000 passenger trips a day. That's the equivalent of four lanes on the Dulles Toll Road. It is essential that this corridor be integrated into the Metro system.

The residents of Fairfax County have long recognized the need for transportation investments and it was gratifying when you voted by a 78 percent margin to approve our transportation bond referendum in November 2004. As soon as that happened we went to work. Of the 82 total projects laid out in our four-year plan, 43 are now complete as a result of your support and, with few exceptions, the remaining projects are moving ahead rapidly.

The Board's initiative to build and improve our pedestrian facilities will invest \$60 million dollars over 10 years in a network that is critical for not only recreation but also for transit connections. The crown jewel is the 40-mile Cross County Trail that runs from Lorton to Great Falls, mostly through some of the county's most lovely stream valleys. Planning is now underway to add and upgrade the connections between the Cross County Trail and the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail to provide our residents access to a 100-mile continuous loop trail network.

No plan for alleviating traffic can be done in a vacuum. Fairfax County is the regional leader in transportation planning and we're proud that the TransAction 2030 plan was adopted by every jurisdiction in the region. Our efforts continue to be honored nationally. In fact, the American Public Transportation Association recently presented me with its 2006 Local Distinguished Service Award in recognition of our progress in the public transportation arena. In addition, the Board was recently honored by the Washington Area Bicyclist Association for launching our Comprehensive Bicycle Initiative, which promotes bicycling as a viable transportation option, adds a full-time bicycle program coordinator, develops a countywide bicycle map, and creates a pilot program for an interconnected bicycling network.

So Rail to Dulles, combined with changing the fundamental way we grow, keeping up the pressure on Richmond to finally take seriously its legislated responsibility to fund transportation solutions for Fairfax County and offering a full menu of transportation alternatives, are all part of the promise this Board of Supervisors will keep, for the sake of today's Fairfax families, our children and their families.

Over and above the agenda, we challenged ourselves in new areas. The Board tasked County staff to review available data and predict what the future might be for us. What will our population look like? What economic and social changes can we expect? And what policy choices are we likely to face as a result? The answer was a groundbreaking report entitled "Anticipating the Future." It paints a vivid picture of a community that has profoundly changed, but is still in motion and poised to respond to the challenges ahead.

In the past 30 years, Fairfax County transformed from a suburban bedroom community into a vibrant, diverse, urbanized economic center of more than a million people. In 1970,

less than four percent of our population was foreign-born; by 2004, one in four residents was born outside the United States, bringing with them a diverse tapestry of cultural, human and economic resources. In 1970, less than one-third of our residents worked within the County; today nearly 55 percent work here.

With all of the challenges facing us, we can not ignore the importance of cultural and enrichment opportunities that are such an important element of our quality of life. We should expand opportunities to artists and the public to participate. Our new arts initiative recognizes the importance of art and the arts in the life of our changing community and we have created a commission to guide us in that exciting new endeavor.

Conventional wisdom holds that communities would be hard pressed to undergo such rapid change without experiencing some stress in the form of increased crime, unemployment or other signs of tension. But here in Fairfax County we have proven conventional wisdom wrong. Through careful planning and our own actions and investments, we have built a quality of life virtually unmatched in the country: the finest schools; the lowest crime rate; excellent libraries; an unparalleled parks network; a AAA bond rating and a county recognized as the best managed county government in the United States by Governing Magazine.

The “Anticipating the Future” report helped us focus on another major challenge, the “aging in place” phenomenon. The quality of life that we have built in Fairfax County has had an interesting effect: Senior citizens who have spent a lifetime helping us build this outstanding community do not want to leave when they retire. Thirty years ago just over 3 percent of our population was 65 years or older; in 2004 that population was 8.6 percent and by 2020 it is estimated to reach 11.6 percent. This trend is bringing demands for safe mobility and affordable, accessible housing. Our seniors also are looking for recreational, economic and volunteer opportunities. We must focus on the mobility and housing needs of this growing segment of our community.

Revitalization and reinvestment in older communities and business districts is another topic that the Board identified early as a priority for the County. In December, the Board of Supervisors met for our second retreat, this time with only one topic on the table – revitalization. From commercial renewal to residential infill, revitalization touches so many aspects of the County’s core mission: transportation, schools, public safety, the economy, the environment. At this second retreat we looked at everything from the Board’s own citizen committee structure to the way County agencies are organized to address revitalization. We heard about innovative success stories and failed efforts from around the country as we worked to shape and retool a more flexible, dynamic process to address the needs and opportunities of a changing landscape. No economy is static. Revitalization in Annandale, Springfield and Lake Anne is essential if we are to prevent decline and disinvestment in our older commercial centers and neighborhoods. We also must look at the challenges in the Richmond Highway corridor and at Fort Belvoir posed by the BRAC process, which will add 22,500 employees to a part of the County that is woefully underserved by transportation.

This is a time in our history where we face uncertainties, new questions and challenges. Where will solutions come from? In a democracy, local government is where critical services are provided to our citizens; it is the level of government closest to our citizens. And it is a high honor for any public official to be asked to serve. I thank you once again for the privilege of serving you and I look forward to working with you to continue Fairfax County's success in 2007.